



Consumer Voice

Newsletter on food safety, health and consumer policy
from the European Commission's Health and Consumer Protection DG

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◀ David Byrne,
Commissioner for
Health and Consumer Protection

EU works well together in 2001: For public health and consumer protection

Final agreement is very close on a Regulation setting up a European Food Authority and a general framework for food law. Meeting in Strasbourg on 11 December, the European Parliament made significant progress on the proposal. With the Commission's full support, the EP changed the name of the Authority to the European Food Safety Authority, found consensus on a broad mandate for the Authority and, in a separate resolution, set out criteria for selecting the location for EFSA.

I hope the European Council this weekend will make a decision on the permanent home for the Authority. My thanks are due to Philip Whitehead, the EP's rapporteur and his team for a high quality job. I also want to thank all MEPs for their excellent cooperation in finding acceptable solutions on all key outstanding issues. Moreover, I would like to record my appreciation to the Belgian Presidency, and in particular Minister Magda Aelvoet for the huge investment made in brokering a final package.

Many other proposals I put forward, such as our proposal for a Directive to ensure safe blood and blood products, moved into the fast track in this last year. The successful transition of these proposals and initiatives through the Institutions has been helped a great deal by the hard work done by the Presidencies - Sweden in the early part of the year and Belgium since June. 2001 has proven that we can all work together capably and quickly on these important issues.

May I wish all our readers a Happy Christmas and a healthy New Year.

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Uncompromising approach to dioxins in food and feed

Council ministers endorsed the Commission's call to be uncompromising and severe on contaminants in animal feed and food for human consumption, when they adopted legally binding maximum levels for dioxins in feed and food. The decision is a milestone for the EU as very few countries in the world have yet set legally binding levels for the presence of dioxin in feed or food. It puts in place a key element of the comprehensive strategy proposed by the Commission. The strategy proposed and agreed is in response to the dioxin contamination problems of the past.

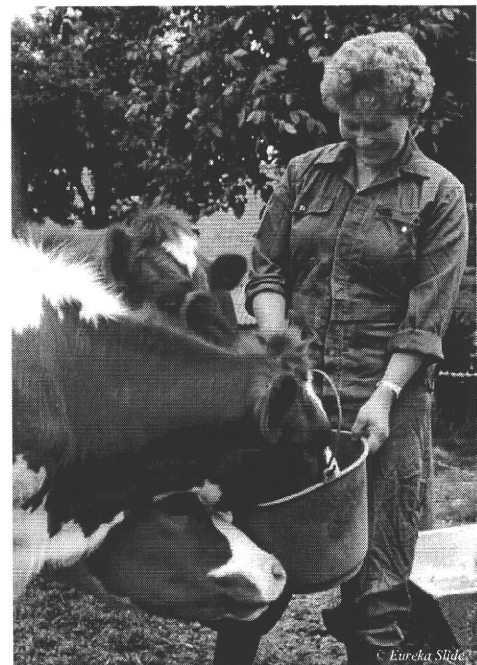
"Our strategy aims to deal with a complicated cycle of contamination needing simultaneous measures to reduce the presence of dioxins, furans and PCBs in our environment, food and feed," Commissioner David Byrne says. The measures adopted by the Council for feed on 27 November, and for food on 29 November, go a long way towards protecting consumer health but they have to be considered as a first step.

"The ultimate goal must be to further reduce dioxin release at the source - to stop it from entering the environment," stresses the Commissioner. To meet that goal, a Commission Recommendation is planned for the near future to establish "action levels" and eventually over time, "target levels".

The action levels will act as a tool for early warning, triggering a proactive approach from competent authorities and operators. The action levels will identify the sources and pathways of the contamination and take measures to eliminate them. Target levels are the levels to be achieved ultimately, acting as a driving force to reduce emissions into the environment.

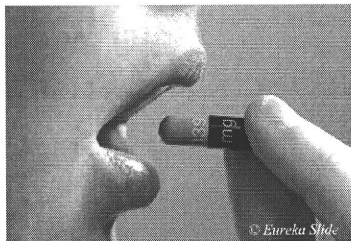
Tightening the rules on animal feed

Political agreement to impose further safeguards on animal feed and through



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■ Safe vitamins and minerals

Yet another Belgian Presidency Common Position was agreed by Council on 3 December, progressing the move towards better food safety legislation throughout the EU. The draft Directive on Food Supplements proposed by the Commission aims to harmonise the widely divergent current Member State national laws governing the sale of vitamins and minerals sold in the form of pills and capsules. Commissioner Byrne welcomed the compromise agreed in the Common Position, saying it put consumer safety first.

The draft legislation requires that maximum limits for vitamin and mineral intake should be set based on scientific risk assessment and details the kind of precise information that should be appear on the label. The label would clearly state that pills should not be used as a substitute for a varied diet. Claims that the product can prevent, treat or cure illness would be forbidden. This proposal also goes to the European Parliament for a second reading under the codecision procedure before it can be formally endorsed.

that, the human food chain was reached in November, tightening the rules on animal feed. Agriculture Council ministers adopted a Common Position on the Regulation proposed by the Commission on animal by-products. This legislation is a major step towards preventing animal feed-borne crises, making the requirements for animal feed as stringent as those on food.

16 million tonnes of animal by-products produced each year in the EU are unsuitable for human consumption. The Regulation will ensure this material is processed safely. Animal by-products, potentially contaminated with BSE or scrapie or from environmental contaminants such as dioxins, will have to be completely disposed of as waste and not recycled into feed.

The Regulation will ban the use of fallen stock and condemned animal material from being recycled into animal feed. In particular, it will prohibit cannibalism (feeding healthy pigs to pigs or healthy poultry to poultry). The next step before this can be finally adopted, is a second reading in the European Parliament.

International conference on Foot and Mouth Disease

The Belgian Presidency hosted an international conference on the prevention and control of foot and mouth disease on 12-13 December with the active support of the Commission. Looking at the lessons learned from the recent epidemic, around 400 participants from all around the world, investigated what could be done to improve current legislation towards preventing such a devastating outbreak from occurring in the future.

Combating food-borne diseases and infections

Zoonoses are diseases or infections that can be transmitted from animals to humans. Salmonella is probably one of the most well known of the zoonotic infections. These diseases and infections often result in humans from bacterial contamination of poultry products, pork, beef, other meat and dairy products. In August, the Commission put forward a proposal for a Regulation setting out a framework for pathogen reduction to reduce the occurrence of these organisms and setting EU-wide targets for zoonotic agents in specific animal populations.

Update on BSE

The European Court of Justice has declared unlawful France's refusal to lift the ban on correctly marked or labelled imports of British beef and veal from 30 December 1999. Commissioner Byrne welcomed the Court's decision and said he expected France to implement the judgment and lift the ban.

The evaluation by the Joint Research Centre of four new rapid tests has now been completed. The Scientific Steering Committee is to examine the evaluation. Work continues on the development of rapid tests capable of distinguishing between BSE and scrapie in sheep. A key area to be addressed is to get more information on the incidence of scrapie in the Community sheep flock.

The Commission has notified the Council of its concerns over the accumulating amounts of meat and bone meal and rendered fat in the Community, calling for appropriate transport, storage and disposal schemes to ensure that stocks are not diverted accidentally or fraudulently for other uses.

For full details on all of these food safety proposals and initiatives, please go to:
http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/index_en.html

Safer market for consumers

While mechanisms to deal with cross border disputes such as the European Extra-Judicial Network (EEJ-Net) and the Financial Services Complaints Network (FIN-Net) are in place to help the consumer follow up on problems, good EU legislation aims to nip problems in the bud where possible.

With this aim, the Council adopted a Commission proposal for a revised Directive on General Product Safety in September. The new directive will update, reinforce and complete the rules for protecting consumer health and safety for non-food products, which have been in place since 1992.

Council also reached political agreement in September on the Directive on Distance Marketing of Financial Services proposed by the Commission. The Directive, when adopted, will set common standards for selling consumer credit, investment funds and pension plans by mail, phone, fax or internet.

It will ban abusive marketing practices such as seeking to oblige consumers to buy a service they have not solicited ("inert selling") or making unsolicited phone calls and e-mails ("cold calling" and "spamming"). There will also be an obligation to provide consumers with comprehensive information before a contract is concluded and the consumer will have the right to withdraw from the contract during a cool-off period - except in cases where there is a risk of speculation. These standards are in line with those already applicable to all other retail sectors.

New standards for e-confidence

The consumer organisations UNICE and BEUC presented an agreement to Commissioner David Byrne on 10 December, that paves the way for a common European standard to enable consumers and businesses to take full advantage of electronic commerce in Europe and to make better use of the Internal Market.

It follows on from the e-confidence initiative launched by Commissioner Byrne in May 2000. UNICE and BEUC agreed to flesh out discussions held earlier this year between the Commissioner and business and consumer representatives in a meeting that reached broad agreement on the requirements for good practice. Welcoming the agreement, Commissioner Byrne says it will provide solid input towards a Commission Recommendation he hopes to see adopted in the coming months.

Green Paper on Consumer Protection

A Green Paper on Consumer Protection was published by the Commission in October. This consultation document is specifically targeted towards stimulating wide debate on options to improve the functioning of the business-to-consumer Internal Market. As one of the first actions to further the debate, a public hearing was held on 7 December in Brussels.

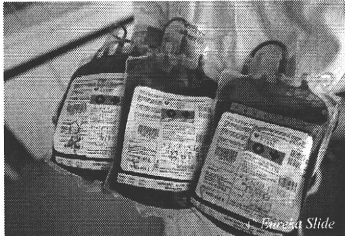
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■ Launch of the Belgian Consumer Centre

Two new European Consumer Centres (ECC) or Euroguichets opened their doors to the public in 2001. The Stockholm ECC opened on 15 March to mark European Consumer Day, and the most recent launch was the ECC launch of 16 October. Belgium added another dimension to the occasion by launching (EEJ-Net) at the same time.

There are now 13 ECCs operating throughout Europe. Jointly financed by the Commission and private or public-sector bodies, they provide individuals with information on their rights as European consumers and help them resolve cross-border consumer disputes.



■ **Full Member State backing for safe blood and blood products legislation**

It was a highly significant moment when the Health Council arrived at a Common Position on the Commission proposal for a Directive to create a comprehensive framework to ensure the safety of blood and blood components throughout the EU. The agreement shows that Health ministers are prepared to put their weight behind this proposal and get things moving. But it is also something of a landmark because this is the first legislative proposal in the area of public health based on Article 152 of the Treaty.

Once adopted, the proposal will contribute an important new part of the acquis or body of EU law in the context of enlargement. It will also provide a useful model for further initiatives on the safety of tissues and cells. Once the new rules are in place, they will replace a current non-binding EU level Recommendation on the safety of the blood transfusion chain.

■ **Health Council backs moves to combat bio-terrorism**

The Commission also secured the strong support of the Member States during the Health Council for urgent action on bio-terrorism preparedness, building on what has already been achieved in the field of communicable diseases.

Fast forward for the health agenda

Overall, the Health Council in November fast-forwarded a number of initiatives from the DG for Health and Consumer Protection. "This is a considerable achievement," according to Director General Robert Coleman, who said he was extremely pleased with the results. In an atmosphere where "unanimous" was a word used lavishly in the resulting texts, file after file was approved and either adopted or a Common Position was adopted where the draft needed to return to the European Parliament under the codecision process for a further reading.

The health ministers unanimously adopted a Commission proposal for a Council Recommendation on the prudent use of antibiotics and other antimicrobial agents in human medicine. It asks national governments to take measures to contain the spread of antimicrobial resistance by encouraging a more prudent use of antibiotics and to raise public awareness of the concerns. This Recommendation is one of the actions the Commission proposed in June this year when it adopted a Community Strategy to combat the threat to human, animal and plant health posed by antimicrobial resistance.

European Health Forum

The European Health Forum was held in November in Brussels. This is an information and consultation event to ensure that the aims of the Community's health strategy, and how they are followed through, is made clear to the public. The Forum responds to public concerns, giving the floor to patient representatives, health professionals and other representatives such as health service providers. All of these contributions feed into health policy development and implementation and are important in setting up priorities for action.

Mental health initiative

Conclusions on a Belgian Presidency initiative to combat stress and depression-related problems were also adopted unanimously. The conclusions are the outcome of a series of conferences and discussions during the Finnish, Swedish and Belgian Council Presidencies and take account of relevant WHO activities. The Commission supports the Presidency initiative and already has plans to include relevant actions within the framework of its new Public Health Programme from 2002.

The Commission reported to the Council on the preparations for the continuing negotiations on the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control and a first discussion was held on the Commission proposal for a Directive on tobacco advertising responding to the European Court of Justice decision on the former Directive. Under the proposed new rules, tobacco advertising will be banned in print media, on radio and internet. Indirect and TV advertising are not covered by this draft Directive, in line with the ECJ judgment.

For full details on all of these public health proposals and initiatives, please go to: http://europa.eu.int/comm/health/index_en.html